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ABSTRACT

The open classroom model, enthusiastically adopted in American elementary schools based on the evident success of the British open primary schools, seemed to be an ideal educational concept for implementation into the middle school. But in the past 2 years, a growing number of educators, both at the middle school and the primary school level, have begun to question the open classroom idea. What appeared to be an exciting new way for students and teachers to work together seems to have resulted in failure in many places. Because open education was a fashionable educational movement, and because such movements are often put into practice faster than their advocates wish, the greatest pitfall is that many teachers and administrators are functioning in the open classroom without deliberate training. As a result, there have been many adverse reactions to open education from educators, parents, and students. Viewing the open system with the same point of reference ordinarily applied to traditional education, however, can be erroneous and misleading. Some features that distinguish open classrooms from traditional classrooms include less teacher lecture time and more individualized instruction, a greater degree of student movement within the classroom, and a higher noise level. Audiovisual resources for inservice training are listed (four items) and a 24-entry bibliography is provided. The appendix offers the table of contents from "Open Classrooms in the Middle Schools" (Schein and Schein). (KM)

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OPEN EDUCATION

A LOOK AT THE SUBTLETIES

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OPEN EDUCATION

A LOOK AT THE SUBTLETIES

A guide for the Unfamiliar Observer
of Intermediate Education

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OCCASIONAL PAPER, NO. 1
APRIL, 1990

With publication of this document on open education in the middle school, the National Middle School Institutes inaugerates a new series of papers on topics of concern to middle school practicioners. Subsequent publication in this series will continue articles on our "at-risk" middle school students, middle school citizenship, computers in the middle school, as well as new proposals for enrichment of the middle school as a learning community.

The editors invite suggestions from our readers as to priorities the above topics and for others not included in the above. These should be sent to "The Editors," NMSI / AMSE, Box 16149, Columbus, Ohio 43216.

Forward

More sociologists may in time come to agree with the few that advance the prognosis that World War II, and not the Great Depression of the 1930's has been the greatest disaster to befall the United States since the War of the American Rebellion. The defeat of the American family institution, the dislocation of populations, the decline of a person-to person infrastructure, are but a few of the events which have left the social fabric of America in its present state. Neither the youth movements, nor women's lib, nor the drug subculture, nor the many federal programs seem to have helped us with our many social problems.

Even in education, where rational and scientific objectivity should be the watchwordl, we have suffered the massive invasion of the multi-national corporations, the many powerful ineffective intrusions of new and old federal bureaucracies, and the retreat of many into a "new stone age" of Skinnerian behaviorism. It in education, however, that we find many of the signs of hope for American civilization: The new middle school, the humanistic education movement, and the open school or open classroom concept are some of these.

The author of this paper may or may not agree with the above postulates of the editor. The author of thi paper does, however, have some of the down to earth answers to questions about the open classroom concept and its implementation. He is a proven leader in helping middle school and elementary school people understand the nature of the open school concept, how to implement it, and how to deal with the problems that arise in even the best of situations.

The Editors refer our readers to the appendix to this occasional paper. The Book by Bernard Schien and Martha Pierce Schein covers the complete litany of open middle school concerns and areas of teacher and administrator interests.

John Blight
Editor

An Introduction

Few Americans would disagree with the proposition that it is a responsibility of the public schools to help children develop the attributes of responsible individualism. For many American educators, the open school or open classroom concept has provided the crucible in which the goal responsible individualism may be best achieved. The evident success of the British open primary schools has kindled the fires of enthusiasm in American elementary schools. The open classroom concept seems to be an ideal setting for implementation of the middle school idea. Yet, in the past two years, a growing number of educators, at the middle school level and at the elementary school level, have asked that we take a second look at the open classroom and what we are doing with it. What seemed to be an exciting new way for pupils and teachers to work together seems to have resulted in failure in many places.

Dillon and Franks are of the opinion that where an open classroom fails, it is almost always because of the attitudes of pupils and teachers. In an article written for *The Nation's Schools* [93, 2 (February, 1974), P. 43-45], Stephen V. Dillon and David D. Franks suggest that at least one of six reasons is behind the failure of each open classroom that "closes:"

> The teacher may be a basically insecure person. Such a teacher does not have the self-confidence to take risks and feels threatened by what is unpredictible. As the authors of the article write, "She (the teacher) must be able to leave the safety and security of transmitting what is known for the risk and suspense of discovering what can result from invective learning."
>
> The teacher may not accept the basic values of open education. (Middle school leadership has had to deal with a very similar problem.) A teacher in an open classroom must trust students, and must believe in the intrinsic worth of every student. To quote the authors, "An open classroom teacher must be committed to the value of freedom and openess and the value of autonomous activity. She also has to realize her responsibility for the process of learning and the personal growth of her students."
>
> The tacher may have failed to set clear limits for students. Open education is first of all an attempt to provide truly free learning experiences *within the limits of structure*. Students need to be made

aware of the effects of their interactions with others and of the need for common courtesy and respect for others.

The teacher may have decided not to yield the transitional position-based teacher power: "Open classroom teachers are just as active as traditional teachers, but they listen, respond, question, and guide individual students instead of lecturing or instructing a large group of students."

The "provisioning for learning" on the part of the school and the teacher was inadequate: In the open classroom, choices which relate to the development of selective perception are important.This confronts the teacher with the need for strenuous and careful planning and careful selection of materials, projects, projects, and activities. These in turn will do much to fix the boundaries for student discipline and decision making.

The open classroom may have been "opened" before students were adequately prepared for the freedom they were to have. Even with a secure teacher, each student may be a part of the cause for open classroom failure. Opening a truly open classroom requires a process of resocialization. In many cases, the students will have come from a closed and coercive environment, and the transition to an open classroom environment is very difficult. Students may be actually afraid of the responsibility for freedom, and may fear that inadequate performance will be the result of attempting to carry out a teacher suggestion or assignment on their own.

For those who seek to find out what actually goes on in an open classroom and to understand what is to be seen int its operation, this following paper will be invaluable. It may help present open classroom practicioners to take the second look at what they are doing. It will assist the new teacher and the interested observer of open education indetermining the structure and the operation of the open classroom, whether in an elementary or an intermediate school setting.

A short list for recommended further reading is presented at the end of the paper, along with a bibliography of some of the more pertinent of today's writing about open education and the open classroom.

Ronald A. Hager

OPEN EDUCATION, A LOOK AT THE SUBTLETIES

A guide for the Unfamiliar Observer of the Intermediate Level of Education

Ronald A. Hager

One of the most rapidly developing educational movements in this country and in England, is that of the Open Classroom and/or School: sometimes referred to as informal or open education. Its impact has hit just about every educational level, including the middle school and the college classroom. The procedure and methods often overlap traditional classrooms but in other cases are drastically different. To define in a precise manner what Open Education is or what the underlying psychological foundation is, would be most difficult. In some respects, the movement is a symptom reflecting an intuitive reaction against the traditional educational process and a general condition within our society. It could be said to be indicative of a desire to develop a new way of living and educating within a complex "global village". As Skip Ascheim has put it, "Open education is a loosely coherent collection of educational philosophies, social visions, and classroom practices on the threshold of fashion".[1]

Like many other fashionable educational movements, it often is put into practice faster than its advocates wish. That is, the ideas are put into action superficially or judged prematurely. The greatest pitfall is that many teachers and administrators are functioning in the open classroom without deliberate training. They echo the ideas before there is substantial understanding regarding the implications and the behavioral change required. As a result, there are many adverse reactions from educators, parents and students. These reactions seem to form a continuum with those on the one extreme using the words open education and open classroom in pejorative sense and those on the other, using the terms positively and hopefully. The negative overtones have been echoed in the past over other such words such as "progressive", "permissive", "freedom", and

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[1] *Materials for the Open Classroom*, edited by Skip Ascheim. Dell Publishing Company Inc. New York, New York. 1971. P. 4

"sensitivity". It seems interesting to note that at the moment there is a jargon calamity for those who use the word "open" in a profane sense. Often the more traditional or conservative oriented person reacts to the word "open" [in regard to education] in a negative fashion. Ironically, these same persons are probably aligned with our present conservatively oriented president, who is using the term "open" as an attempt to reflect the image of his administration. Is this the use of a fashionable term for political reasons, or is there a linkage between the president's use of "open" and open education?

In a more realistic perspective, most persons involved with the open education movement are gathered somewhere between the extremes, perhaps moving more toward the excited, hopeful end of the continuum than the doubting end. Many educators are proceeding with justificable caution. Regardless, the struggle to make the open education system a viable alternative [perhaps even a replacement to the traditional system] continues. Efforts are being made to establish more communication and clearer agreement on what open education entails as well as establishing newer forms of training for those who desire to teach within such a system.

This author aligns himself with those persons who see the Open Education concept as a positive, contributing process which can answer some of the education questions we are facing. At the same time it is recognized that Open Education is in the fashionable idea mode and is vulnerable to rape. Today, many schools are attempting to establish an Open Education process but often end up with traditional education with a new name and/or building. On another level, some open classrooms develop in such a fashion that no one, including the teachers and administrators, knows what is happening, or has any rationale for the development except perhaps some rhetoric founded in such cliches as "Children can do anything the want to", "Students should never be told what to do because it will stifle their creativity", etc..

Perhaps the most unfair reactions to open education come from the unfamiliar observers, be they teachers, administrators, parents or students who have nothing but a traditional point of reference to make judgements. Often these persons observe the open classroom and/or school and leave with such impressions as "It's chaos", "Children aren't learning", "Teachers don't have control" and "There is too much noise". All of these reactions are basically oriented to the more usual education process and may not be the best base for forming a reaction to what one is observing. In fairness, it should be pointed out that the above comments may be accurate in some cases because the whole development of Open Education is still in a state of flux. Nevertheless, there are some general but universal elements that take place in the well functioning open schools and/or classrooms that the untrained

observer may miss or be unaware of. The remainder of this article is intended to address itself to this particular audience in order to provide some possible guidelines to better understand what may be happening in the open classroom and why. Further, it is an attempt to point out some of the subtleties that take place especially at the intermediate education range.

GUIDELINES FOR OBSERVERS — DECENTRALIZATION

Perhaps the three most common perceptions of the novice observer are that the teacher is difficult to locate, that students move around a great deal and that there is considerable noise. The inability to visually locate or identify the teacher is common to most open settings because it is designed into the concept. Although there are numerous reasons for this, two main ones are that [1] the teacher has decentralized the authoritative point of the classroom and [2] there usually is established a different working relationship with the students. Part of this rationale is to give students a greater chance to gain self reliance and exercise their growing intellect in a more individualized pattern. In the more usual classroom it is clearly obvious that the teacher is in charge and much teacher reliance is evident with greater emphasis on standardized thinking. Further, there is clearly a central focus point. Often this focus is identified by the direction the desks are facing which is usually toward the one wall that has the largest black boards and the teacher's desk. In the open classroom the teacher's position is decentralized so that the teacher's desk may be in some obscure corner. The student's desks are, more often than not, arranged in a variety of ways, perhaps in small groups or in some individualized and flexible pattern. In addition, the working relationship the teacher has with students often is informal in style. The teacher may be sitting on the floor while discussing or sitting with a student at his seat. This type of working relationship further obscures visual sighting of the teacher by the observer. It should be pointed out here that because the teacher tries to decentralize his position does not mean he is not without control or influence on the class. The teacher remains as the predominant influence and usually develops control by agreement as opposed to overt control by decree and respect out of fear, which is often found in the more traditional classroom setting.

Not very often does the teacher in the open setting stand up to instruct before the entire class for long periods of time. More often than not the instructor's time is spent encouraging the individual students in their efforts and involvement. The student is encouraged to gather and utilize information, is guided toward insights, is helped toward self evaluation of studies, and nudged toward integrating his thinking by discussing

relationships. In general, the teacher's responsibility is to personalize the learning process and facilitate the individual's learning pattern [the *how* of learning]. The unfamiliar observer of such a teacher-student relationship should take into account the subtleties in interaction that could take place within a short period of time.

STUDENT MOVEMENT

One of the main reasons that there is more student movement in the open education setting is that diversity in the learning process is encouraged. It is fully recognized that students can learn in many ways about a particular area of study. Although there is often a common aim within the content area of study, students develop a variety of ways of reaching it. Seldom will the entire class be working on a similar work book page or page in a common textbook as is so often found in the more traditional classroom. The observer of such a setting would probably find some students working with different media such as paint, crayons, clay, and still others working with filmstrips, records, slides, while others may be discussing in small groups or preparing some kind of presentation such as a play or a panel discussion. Because the concept of multiple ways to learn is encouraged in recognition of individual learning, students react in varying ways. Usually a high percentage of students will be moving around the room pursuing the alternative ways of learning. The novice observer may, at this point, judge the movement as random and disturbing without actually checking to see if these observations are valid. Often if the visiting observer takes the time to talk with some of the students he will find that most of them have a purpose behind their behavior. Essentially, students have made individual decisions on how they will go about working with the materials and ideas with which they have been confronted. Of course, in a more traditional classroom students also move around; however, it is usually for a teacher designated purpose: For example, going to the library for a particular kind of book or research material within the teacher's frame of reference. In the open classroom the decision process is left more open by design. Students have the opportunity to spend time thinking over what decisions they will make or sometimes what "hunches" they will follow. Students do make some decisions which the more traditionally minded educator might term trivial or non-consequential. However, it is a part of the open classroom theory to provide the student with the opportunity to practice making decisions. The assumption is that sound

decision making does not develop without some types of experiences which help the individual look at alternatives, deal with consequences, focus on a direction, and attempt to follow through on a personal idea. Sometimes the decision making process runs into snags and doesn't totally materialize. The follow-through on a decision, although encouraged, is not as important as having the opportunity to work within the various components [choice, spontaneous ideas, data relationship, cause and effect, discovery and hunch following] that contribute to the decision making process. Here again it is important for the unfamiliar observer not to overly react to what may be happening superficially and to keep in mind the subtleties that may be underlying the student's behavior.

NOISE LEVEL

The decentralized position of the teacher and the promotion of multiple ways to learning with the accompanying movement of students, does contribute to raising the noise level within a classroom and/or school. In this author's experience the unfamiliar observer often makes the rather rash judgement that the noise disturbs or is not conducive to a good learning environment. However, if the observer would take the time to check with some student to see if indeed the noise level is disturbing, generally they will find that students are not at all handicapped by the noise. This is assuming the noise is within a reasonable range. In comparing the noise level to the more traditional classroom, it is discernibly higher. In any case, students in the open environment are not often hindered nor are their studies impeded by the noise level. It is usually the visiting adults who make reference to being concerned about the noise. Usually they make a relative comparison to the "silence is golden" attitude so often found in the more usual classroom.

TEACHER AS MODEL

Another important, but subtle behavior pattern that develops within the open classroom is that which relates to the "Teacher as Model" concept. When the teacher becomes less of an overt authority in the open classroom it often influences the students' attitude since the students are somewhat of a mirror of the teacher's authority. When the teacher functions in the more usual role he makes judgements on what is right and wrong. When this type of right-wrong syndrome is less emphasized and students have a chance to influence the direction of the class and to influence the direction of their individual studies a different attitude develops. More equality in the interpersonal relations within the classroom usually evolves. In addition, a more relaxed atmosphere is evident which often enables students to take more risks and to offer more reactions, criticisms, ideas, etc. Under stricter

conditions where the guiding force is overtly clear, as it is in many traditional classrooms, the students are less likely to take chances unless they know for certain that what they are offering is correct or what the teacher will approve. An unfamiliar observer of the open classroom would see more students doing more risk taking and probably showing more emotions than ordinarily seen in the traditional classroom. Without knowing what has contributed to this setting the first time observer could make an erroneous judgement.

One of the more subtle ways a teacher in the open environment does decentralize authority is by the pattern of his/her dress. Symbolically the shirt, tie, and suit or the feminine equivalent does carry with it an air of authority. In the open classroom, the dress of the teacher is more casual partly for practical reasons because they are more likely to be involved with paint, crayons, experiments, and various informal seating positions.

IN SUMMARY

In the final analysis the novice observer of the open classroom system, especially at the intermediate level, has to realize he is viewing a process that is in its embryonic state. Further, the content approach, teacher attitude, and general learning atmosphere are drastically different from the traditional method of instruction in most cases. Viewing the open system with the same point of reference ordinarily applied to traditional education can be erroneous and misleading.

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AUDIO-VISUAL RESOURCES FOR IN-SERVICE PROGRAMS

Learning How to Learn: The Open Classroom in America

I/D/E/A P.O. Box 628, Far Hills Branch, Dayton, Ohio 45419.
16 mm sound film; 15 minutes; Rental $8, Purchase $150.

Discovery and Experience, British Broadcasting Corporation.

Time-Life Films, 4 W. 16th St., New York, NY 10001;
16mm. sound films; Series of 10 films—30 minutes each;
Rental $30 each (10/$250).

Open Space Planning for Curriculum and Staff. Educational Facilities

Center, 223 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago IL 60601.
Audio cassette, 45 minutes; $6.95.

Children Are People, ("A Study of Informal Education in Primary Schools in England")

Agathon Press, 150 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10011.
16 mm film—sound/color; Rental $45 one day, Purchase $450.,
42 minutes

APPENDIX

OPEN CLASSROOMS IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Bernard Schein and Marta Pierce Schein

West Nyack , NY. Parker Publishing Co., 1975

1. PROVIDING CHOICES: TRANSITION TO AN OPEN CLASSROOM
    1. Practical Ways to Begin - from the first day on
    2. *How children group themselves*
    3. How Children Find Their Own Levels of Learning
    4. How Children Learn Grammar and Math Skills Through Their Interests
    5. Through Their Interests
    6. Homework?
    7. Cheating
    8. Guidelines for Devising and Using Learning Projects
    9. What an Open Classroom in a Middle School Might Look Like

2. DISCOVERING STUDENT'S INTERESTS IN THE OPEN CLASSROOM
    1. How Children Learn in the Open Middle School:
    2. One Thing Leads to Another
    3. How to discover for yourself what children are like
    4. Using Inexpensive Materials in Diverse Ways
    5. Workshop Experiences for Training to Extend Children's
    6. Learning Through their Interests

3. HOW TO KNOW WHEN CHILDREN ARE LEARNING: WAYS TO LET PARENTS KNOW
    1. Guidelines for Assessing Children's Learning in the Open Middle School
    2. A Conference to Change a Teacher's Approach to Assessing Children's Learning
    3. Alternatives to Diagnostic Tests
    4. Techniques for Assessing Children's Learning Through
    5. Listening and Talking
    6. Using Assessment to Value Children's Work
    7. Reporting to Parents
    8. Guidelines for Completing The Report Form
    9. Teacher or Team-Parent Conferences

4. SCHEDULING IN THE OPEN MIDDLE SCHOOL
    1. How to Develop, Organize, and Implement the School-Wide Free Day
    2. How Children Make Choices on the School-Wide Free Day
    3. How the School-Wide Free Day Is a Step Toward a
    4. Comprehensive Open Schedule
    5. Implementing the Open Schedule
    6. Middle School Children Want to Learn in an Open Schedule
    7. Scheduling in the Self-Contained Open Classroom

5. DEVELOPING THE SUPERVISORY ROLE
    1. Theory Comes from Experience
    2. The First Conference: Inducting Teachers to Make the
    3. Initial Commitment to Change
    4. The Ten-Day Workshop: Ways to Change Teachers
    5. Ongoing Training: More Ways to Change Teachers
    6. A Case History of How One Teacher Changes:
    7. Implications for How Other Teachers Change

6. DISCIPLINE IN THE OPEN SCHOOL
    1. How Open Education Reduces Discipline Problems
    2. Discipline Problems Before the Open Program Is Sufficiently
    3. Developed and Techniques for Solving Them
    4. How Children Can Resolve Discipline Problems Themselves

5. How the School-Wide Free Day Can Be Used to
6. Reduce Discipline Problems
7. Reducing discipline Problems Through Therapy
8. How House Meetings Reduce Discipline Problems

7. MAKING A BIG SCHOOL SMALLER PROMOTES STUDENT INVOLVEMENT
   1. How Much Student Involvement
   2. Students Making Rules: A Phony Phenomenon
   3. Participatory Democracy Through the House Meeting
   4. Representative Democracy Through the
   5. Representative Government Meeting

8. INVOLVING THE COMMUNITY: A TWO-PRONGED DILEMMA
   1. Guidelines for Community Involvement
   2. Pitfalls of Community Involvement
   3. Suggestion for Acquiring and Sustaining Community
   4. Support for the Open Middle School
   5. Realistic Ways to Involve the Community

9. WHAT OPEN EDUCATION IS—AND WHAT IT IS NOT
   1. Criteria for an Open Middle School
   2. Counter Blows to the Open Middle School: Behavioral
   3. Objectives, the Unit Approach, and Programmed Instruction
   4. Decision-Making in the Open Middle School
   5. Open Education Affects Children
   6. Open Education Affects Teachers
   7. Open Education Affects Parents